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by

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Brand communities on social media

A case study of microblog hosted by BenQ in Taiwan

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Brand communities on social media

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2009

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The importance of social media is growing day by day because consumers increasingly use online platforms to facilitate social interaction. One new form of social media is microblog. The real time and ubiquitous communication that can deliver to a network of people is a great benefit for marketers to build online brand communities. The paper investigates the communication between the company and consumers based on BenQ's case in Taiwan. The focuses lie in addressing the types of topic, techniques for marketing purposes and eWOM. These findings should assist marketers and academics in their understanding of brand communities on social media.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
LIST OF TABLE	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	4
BRAND COMMUNITY	4
VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITY	5
eWOM.....	8
SOCIAL MEDIA	11
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	14
METHOD	17
RESEARCH SETTING	17
ANALYSIS	18
RESULTS	27
CASUAL CONVERSATION.....	27
ANNOUNCEMENT	28
INFORMATION PROVISION	28
SURVEY	29
TECHNIQUES FOR MARKETING PURPOSES	31

eWOM.....	34
DISCUSSION	36
CONCLUSION	42
BIBLIOGRAPHY	44
VITA	58

LIST OF TABLE

Table 1

Examples on BenQ brand community	30
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LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.

The Plurk sign-in page.....19

Figure 2.

The plurks in a user's timeline.....20

Figure 3.

A one-line plurk.....21

Figure 4.

The profile of A Ji Shih on Plurk.....25

INTRODUCTION

The advent of Web 2.0 has changed the way people consume media. The concept of Web 2.0 began with a conference brainstorming session between Tim O'Reilly and Dale Dougherty as the bursting of the dot-com bubble cast an air of pessimism over the future of the Internet. Nevertheless, things changed in the age of Web 2.0, in which the Internet gained unprecedented importance with innovative new applications. Web 2.0 is a "set of principles and practices" that utilizes the Web as a "platform" and aims at "harnessing collective intelligence" (O'Reilly, 2005). Unlike Web 1.0, Web 2.0 is consumer-centric, user-generated, and interactive. It requires consumer participation and sharing. Thus, accompanied by Web 2.0 was the emergence of social media. OgilvyOne, in a February 2009 report called "Can Brands Have a Social Life?" defined social media as "the combination of channels, platforms, communities, content and tools that power the phenomenon of peer to peer communication or word of mouth" (p. 5). Social media comprises six areas: social networking platforms; social bookmarking platforms; content, applications, and media; blogging platforms; social gaming; and social connectivity tools.

The rise of social media is a worldwide phenomenon. The digital marketing firm eMarketer released a report called "Social Networking Worldwide: Ad Spending and Usage in March 2009." According to the report, nearly 75% of Internet users visited a social network site in March 2009, and 41.2% of the U.S. Internet user population browsed social networking sites (Williamson, 2009a). Social media in Asia especially shows exuberant life. OgilvyOne (2009) estimated that 80% of Internet users in Asia use social media. In addition, over 450 million Asian consumers are engaged in social media

(OgilvyOne, 2009). The size of the pie is so huge that marketers cannot ignore it, as social media is so endemic in Internet content.

Marketers began flocking to social media to exploit new opportunities. Social media creates opportunities to achieve marketing objectives such as branding, improving customer loyalty, boosting sales, direct marketing, and engaging in e-commerce. A research firm, Marketing Sherpa, surveyed social media among marketing professionals in 2008. The survey showed that 92% of respondents said social media marketing (including social networks, blogs, user reviews, and forums) was effective at influencing brand reputation, and 91% said it worked for increasing brand awareness (eMarketer, 2009). Furthermore, social media facilitates electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Nielsen Online found that 70% of consumers trust opinions posted online. For those respondents, online brand Web sites are considered the trustworthiest of all types of online marketing approaches (Nielsen, 2009). If brands can engage consumers in social media content, it is more likely that consumers will spread positive word of mouth (Williamson, 2009b).

International Telecommunication Union reported that 65.7 % of total population in Taiwan is using the Internet (Taiwan: Telecom Indicators, 2009). According to a survey conducted by comScore, a marketing research company, the Taiwanese spent 18.1 hours a day using the Internet on average (Nguyen, 2009). The high penetration rate of internet usage and internet addiction serve as good reasons why social media should be studied in Taiwan, where the emergence of social media opens up a huge opportunity for brands to build online brand communities and generate positive eWOM. Microbloggings is a new means of social communication. The promptness and ubiquity of microbloggings

allow people to share immediate sentiment and insights to everyone connected. As a consequence, the outlook of building brand communities on microbloggings is promising in terms of relationship marketing and eWOM branding. In order to get a better understanding of how online brand communities in social media are operated in Taiwan, this paper describes one successful microblog, called Plurk, developed by BenQ, a consumer electronic brand. By analyzing BenQ case in Taiwan, the paper attempts to discover the interaction between the company and consumers. Based on the findings, the paper will offer techniques for marketing purpose.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, the paper reviews the brand community literature and describes how the virtual environment helped the brand community evolve and result in eWOM communication. Then, the paper gives an overview of social media in Taiwan, followed by the case study of BenQ, using one form of social media, microblogging, as a platform. The purpose of the study is to categorize types of brand and consumer interactions facilitated by the brand community of microblogging and therefore offer opportunities that marketers can leverage in determining marketing strategy. Finally, the paper will suggest possible principles for building a successful brand community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

BRAND COMMUNITY

Although the concept of community has long been discussed within a sociological context, communities are now created based on individuals' free will. Participants choose to join the community because of common interest or passion for an object or activities (Amine, 2004). Consumption can be part of the reason for joining a community, and people form communities on the basis of consumption experience (Christine, 1996). Boorstin (1973) described consumption communities as communities created and preserved by how and what people consume. Deriving from consumption communities, emotional clustering around a particular brand is one of the important developments in the concept of the brand community.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) introduced the idea of brand communities. These communities are largely imagined (Anderson, 1983), and they represent a form of social relationship within a consumption context. Aficionados of the brand voluntarily form a social entity that is free from geographical boundaries. The shared meaning invested in the brands and collective significance is crucial for the sociological clustering of brand communities. Members feel emotional attachment not only to the brand but also to one another even if they have never met. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) envisioned brand communities as a consumer-consumer-brand triad, in which brands linked consumers to brand and consumer to consumer. Based on the triad, brand communities are viewed as consumer agencies where consumers' voices can be heard. Community members rely on

other members for knowledge sharing. Thus, they obtain social benefits from engaging in such communal interactions.

Marketers have acknowledged the benefits of building brand communities as they affect brand equity (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Brand equity encompasses four components: perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand awareness, and brand associations (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). A brand community positively affects constituents of brand equity and enhances brand loyalty in general (Fournier, 1998; Fournier & Yao, 1997; Lutz, 1987; Olsen, 1993). It actualizes the concept of relationship marketing (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Many studies have focused on the field of relationship marketing (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Gruen, Summers, & Acito, 2000; Price & Arnould, 1998), and one of the crucial factors in successful relationship marketing is whether marketers can engage customers in a marketing dialogue and maintain constant communication. Nowadays, more and more firms take advantage of virtual brand communities in leveraging relationship marketing communications (Andersen, 2005).

VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITY

Over the past decade, personal computers have become a fixture in most households. At the same time, software and hardware have been greatly improved and thus have prepared cyberspace for the coming of virtual communities. A virtual community provides a social aggregation where people can interact with each other (Preece, 2000). People in virtual communities type to exchange their opinions and information, conduct commerce, and find emotional support. They do everything they do in real life; the only difference lies in the fact that they are behind screens (Rheingold,

1993). The concept of virtual community gains its popularity from the endemic nature of the Internet. Although the definition of virtual communities varies from author to author, the literature reveals at least three common core elements. First, virtual communities exist in cyberspace via computer-mediated communication (Armstrong & Hagel, 1995; Erickson, 1997; Rheingold, 1993). However, some virtual communities are initiated from offline activities and may engage in online as well as offline interaction (Koh & Kim, 2004; Weinreich, 1997). In addition, researchers suggest that virtual communities serve as platforms for interpersonal interaction (Carver, 1999; Erickson, 1997). Rheingold (1993) stated that sufficient human feeling developed through continuous interactions is one component necessary to form a virtual community. Finally, researchers agree that individuals gather in virtual communities due to common interests, values, or interest in discussing specific issues with others (Armstrong & Hagel, 1995; Rheingold, 1993). Thus, virtual community can be defined as “a group of people with common interests or goals, interacting for knowledge (or information) sharing predominately in cyberspace” (Koh & Kim, 2004). Of all the types of virtual communities, this paper focuses on virtual brand communities.

Previous researchers have shown that interactivity is the stimulus for a consumer to get in touch with the company and community members (Bellman, Johnson, Lohse, & Mandel, 2006; Ghose & Dou, 1998; Sicilia, Ruiz, & Munuera, 2005). Online communities allow interaction between companies and consumers. As such, the “real” conversation developed by online brand communities strengthens the tie among all the stakeholders (Szmigin, Canning, & Reppel, 2005). People are more interested in the

social links that come from brand affiliations than in the brands themselves (Fournier, 2009). Given the opportunities that a virtual environment provides, participants share extraordinary consumption experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993). The process of consumption experience sharing reinforces virtual interpersonal ties, and gradually, virtual ties become real ties and weak ties get stronger. Eventually, strong ties transform into emotional commitment. The cumulative effect on online brand communities and the bonds engendered by them is the solidifying of consumers' emotional and behavioral attachment to a brand (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002).

Consumers are more inclined to be loyal to a brand if they participate in a brand community developed around it (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Andersen, 2005; Benyoussef, Hoffmann, Roehrich, & Valette-Florece, 2006; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In addition, brand loyalty induces positive word of mouth (Hallowell, 1996). Some researchers also propose that participation in brand communities increases purchase intentions and future purchases (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Thus, nowadays, more and more companies exploit the advantages of online brand communities to facilitate effective communication and obtain valuable feedback. In general, researchers tend to group brand communities into two types, depending on the host of the community (Henri & Pudelko, 2003; Kozinets, 1999; Porter, 2004). In consumer-initiated online brand communities, beneficial information, valuable consumption experiences, and discussions of the strengths as well as the weaknesses of products are provided. Company-initiated online brand communities, on the other hand, can provide detailed specifications of the products. However, as companies control the communities,

unfavorable opinions are likely to be removed from any discussions (Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008).

eWOM

The importance of word-of-mouth referral behavior has long been taken for granted. Being independent from marketers' selling intentions, word of mouth is considered to be more credible than any other type of referral in the marketplace (Bone, 1995; Lau & Ng, 2001). Thus, it is influential in shaping consumers' attitudes and decisions (Brown & Reingen, 1987). It is also more effective than any other traditional marketing tool (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Based on the literature, Pollach (2006) concluded that consumers engage in word-of-mouth activities for three reasons: information seeking, risk reduction, and self-assurance. Rather than attempting to influence receivers, the word-of-mouth process can be viewed as seeking social support (Arndt, 1967).

With the advent of computer-mediated communication, the conversation moved from offline activities to online activities. The Internet facilitates the dissemination of eWOM, which further highlights the power of the diffusion of words in virtual communities (Dellarocas, 2003; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006). The term eWOM refers to any positive or negative comments about products or companies that are made available by individuals via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Given the nature of the Internet, the information can be directed to multiple individuals and can be delivered anonymously; as a result, eWOM deserves both managers' and researchers' attention.

Motivation of eWOM communication providers. Dichter (1966) proposed that people who initiate word of mouth on certain products or services expect satisfaction of some kind. He categorized four types of motivation for people to talk about a product or service: product involvement, self-involvement, message involvement, and other involvement. Recommending a company or brand promises the word-of-mouth provider gratification by giving something to the receiver. Sometimes people feel obligated to help others because of problems they encountered. Consumers may also reduce the cognitive dissonance that follows a major purchase by discussing it with others (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1993). Furthermore, the commitment to the brand will engage consumers in word-of-mouth communication to promote the company (Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998).

People participate in eWOM communication for a similar set of motivations as those associated with traditional word of mouth communication. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) identified the motivations consumers have for articulating their views on Web-based consumer-opinion platforms: social benefits, concern for others, and self-enhancement. Consumers gain social benefits such as identification and social integration by engaging in virtual community communication. Through eWOM communication, participants display their presence in the virtual communities and feel they are part of them (McWilliam, 2000; Oliver, 1999). The concern for others motive can be viewed as altruism, which is intensively discussed in philosophical and marketing literature (Carman, 1992; Nagel, 1970; Paul, Miller, & Paul, 1993; Price, Feick, & Guskey, 1995). According to the previously discussed literature on word of mouth, consumers are

motivated to lead others to positive experiences and save others from negative experiences by disseminating their opinions. The same is true in the online environment. The self-enhancement motivation is driven by a desire for the approval of others. Therefore, eWOM is associated with gratification that can be achieved by being viewed as a consumption expert or a connoisseur in the context of a Web-based platform (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

The adoption of eWOM. Similarity, tie strength, and source credibility between seekers and senders determine how consumers assess information exchanged in traditional word-of-mouth communications (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox, & Harrel, 1997; Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger, & Yale, 1998). Traditional word of mouth is dependent on the congruence of individuals in terms of certain attributes, such as demographic and lifestyle similarities (Ruef, Aldrich, & Carter, 2003; Schacter, 1959). Tie strength is defined as the intensity of an individual-to-individual social relation. The degree of closeness of the relationship between the information provider and the receivers classifies social relations into two dimensions: strong tie and weak tie (Bristor, 1990; Duhan et al., 1997; Money, Gilly, & Graham, 1998). Strong ties are more likely to activate the flow of information (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Source credibility refers to the perceived competence of the source providing the information. A source is determined to be more credible if there is a perception that it has greater expertise and trustworthiness.

Nevertheless, the processes related to offline information evaluation are not directly applied to describe eWOM and the unique aspects of online information

exchange should be considered. Brown, Broderick, and Lee (2007) took the attributes of online environments into account and offered a conceptualization of online social networks. They found that online homophily is not driven by interpersonal relationship. Rather, it is the congruence of a shared group interest and mindset provided by a Web site. In addition, individual-to-individual social relation is less important in online contexts. Tie strength is interpreted as the level of emotional attachment between individuals and the online communities, and interaction affects the strength of the tie. Thus, the quality of the relationship between users and an online community may influence the users' appraisal of eWOM on websites. In these cases, source credibility is determined by the perception of credibility of the Web site as well as the expertise the provider possesses.

SOCIAL MEDIA

As part of the Web 2.0 wave of applications, social media is designed to provide channels, platforms, communities, content, and tools for social interaction. Popular social media includes blogs and Web forums, social bookmarking sites, photo- and video-sharing communities, as well as social networking platforms such as Facebook and microblogging platforms such as Twitter, which offer a combination of all of these with an emphasis on the relationships among the users of the community. Nowadays, people not only consume information, they generate their own content. As a result, social media has a great advantage over traditional media in the collection of documents. Thus, users' information-seeking behavior changes greatly. Instead of conducting keyword searches via a search engine, users answer questions posed by other users and get direct responses.

The rich structural nature of social media provides huge amounts of data. In addition, social media exhibits a wide variety of “user-to-document relation types, and user-to-user interaction” (Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis, & Mishne, 2008). They facilitate communication in terms of speed, scale, and cost and allow people to serendipitously connect to one another, exchanging information. Thus, this feature of social media provides great opportunities for eWOM to flow.

Microblogging is a new form of social media that has come to marketers’ attention. Just as the name suggests, microblogging is a smaller version of Web-logging (commonly called blogging) with greater mobility (Böhringer & Richter, 2009). It is a form of blogging that allows users to write short comments (usually 140 characters) to be viewed either by anyone or by a group chosen by the user. Microblogging enables users to communicate easily and promptly with these short posts. It allows people to post their interests, current activities, experiences, and thoughts for their friends and other observers to see via text messaging, instant messaging, and e-mail. In addition, users can follow other members’ activities by adding them to their networks (Böhringer & Richter, 2009). The light burden of real-time communication requires less time investment and thus encourages users to update frequently (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007). As the comments on microblogs are immediate and ubiquitous, marketers should include this new mode of communication in their considerations about eWOM branding (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009)

Since microblogging is a very new phenomenon, there has been little academic research on the topic to date. Java et al. (2007) identified who uses microblogs and why.

They found that people use Twitter for daily chatting, sharing information/URLs, and reporting news. Regarding users' intentions in posting comments, it is not surprising to find that Twitter users can be classified into three groups: information seekers, friends, and information sources. An information source may have a large number of followers if he or she offers valuable information. On the other hand, source seekers are a group of quiet followers. Friends constitute a strong network in microblogging. Most users utilize microblogs to follow the lives of their families, acquaintances, and co-workers (Huberman, Romero, & Wu, 2009).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Vint Cerf, vice president and chief Internet proponent for Google, is considered one of the fathers of the Internet. Cerf predicted that Asia would change the Internet landscape due to the fact that Asia has the largest Internet population along with one of the lowest penetration rates (Savitz, 2007). Currently, there are over 7 million Internet users in Asia, and that only accounts for 18.5% penetration. When the penetration reaches 70%, as in Asia's Western counterparts, the nature of the Internet will evolve as its popularity expands. The consumption of the Internet will surely be influenced by the boost in the number of users in the Asian population. Cerf also said that mobile phones would play an important part in reshaping how people consume the Internet. At the time of the study, over 450 million consumers were actively engaged with social media in Asia (Savitz, 2007). Therefore, the scope of social media is promising in Asia. In addition, consumers in Asia were most likely to depend on others' opinions in shaping their views on a brand and purchase intention. According to a survey conducted by Nielsen, word of mouth generates considerable levels of trust across much of the Asia-Pacific region. Hong Kong (93%) and Taiwan (91%) are ranked as two of the top ten markets that rely most on word of mouth from consumers (Nielsen, 2007). Given the potential that social media possesses and the power of word of mouth in Asia, it is necessary to examine how word-of-mouth trends translate in social media content in this population.

Taiwan provides excellent soil for nourishing social media. The prevailing sensationalism in media could be attributed to the acrimonious competition and unregulated media environment in Taiwan. In order to gain viewership and readership,

traditional media outlets resort to sensationalism. The extremely sensational content results in consumers' diminishing trust in traditional media and a growing trend of turning to social media for information.

OgilvyOne (2009) reported that blogging has become a popular channel for expressing opinions in Taiwan. According to the survey, 86% of Internet users have read a blog, while 70.9% have started their own blogs. Nielsen (2007) reported that, when choosing from a plethora of marketing strategies, 91% of Taiwanese perceived recommendations from other consumers as the most credible source of word of mouth. In terms of consumer trust in Web-based consumer opinions posted online, such as blogs, 76% of Taiwanese respondents reported that they believe online opinions. It is generally believed that famous bloggers have more credibility. Not surprisingly, Taiwan is a country full of star bloggers (OgilvyOne, 2009).

The new trend of microblogs is intriguing as well. A standard microblog is roughly the length of a newspaper headline and subhead (Milstein, Chowdhury, Hochmuth, Lorica, & Magoulas, 2008). While the length restrictions of microblogs prevents people from making long comments, this extremely condensed content lends itself well to constantly updating perceptions and keeping in touch with friends and family.

All of this clearly suggests that brands can facilitate positive word of mouth by adopting microblogging as a communication platform. Microblogging allows people to share their sentiments about brands almost everywhere, via any means that allows people to be connected and on a scale that has never been seen before (Jansen et al., 2009).

Given the communication characteristics, it is essential to explore the microblogging phenomenon in Taiwan, one of the key nations in the Asia-Pacific region. Nevertheless, existing research on microblogging still is quite rare, although coming quickly. With this stimulus, this study intends to achieve these objectives and shed light on the phenomenon from a marketing perspective by examining one of the most notable cases in Taiwan:

1. Discover patterns of interaction between company-initiated microblogging and customers.
2. Analyze marketing techniques that marketers can use by building online brand communities through microblogging.
3. Provide suggestions for building and maintaining strong brand communities through microblogging.

METHOD

RESEARCH SETTING

While Twitter is viewed as the leading microblogging platform in the world, Taiwan is not a follower of the trend. Instead, Taiwanese are more engaged in “plurking.” There are over 1 million plerkers in the world, with an estimated 500,000 users in Taiwan (Huang, 2009). According to the site’s own data, 34.5% of new plerkers come from Taiwan (Plurk.com). In addition, owing to the characteristics of microblogging such as instantaneous message delivery and subscriptions to receive updates (Jansen et al., 2009), many celebrities in Taiwan utilize Plurk as a great platform to interact with their fans, which encourages more and more people to follow them on the site.

Given that the study attempts to discover patterns of interaction between brands and consumers and thus provide possible guidelines for maintaining successful brand communities, the study reports a case analysis on Plurk. BenQ, as a consumer electronic brand, has exerted significant effort in building and maintaining long-term relationships with end consumers. As building brand communities can fortify the consumer-brand relationship, BenQ expends much energy in building its brand community through social networking. The efforts that BenQ has made have been rewarded. BenQ initiated its account in April 2009 and has attracted nearly 1,500 followers on Plurk (Plurk). Compared to other electronic consumer brands such as ASUS (May: 852 fans), Hewlett-Packard (June: 545 fans), and Sony (July: 1,178 fans), BenQ seems to be the most successful community on Plurk. For this reason, BenQ is an ideal candidate for the research.

Previous literature has shown that interactivity is the stimulus for consumers to participate in brand communities with companies and community members. The level of interaction on Plurk between company and consumers can be determined by the frequency of posts in the conversation and whether the company eagerly listens and responds to community members. To this end, the study utilizes built-in features of Plurk such as karma value, plurks, and plurk responses to evaluate the level of interaction between company and consumers. In addition, the study explores types of conversation and information sharing that have taken place on Plurk.

With appropriate management, brand communities will induce positive word of mouth. Because of this, the study examines whether people are talking about the BenQ brand by utilizing the Plurk search feature. Finally, the study analyzes the characteristics of the BenQ community and provides possible explanations on how the BenQ brand community gets it right.

ANALYSIS

In order to collect the information, the researcher has collected all the plurks on BenQ account from April 2009 to November 2009. The researcher repeatedly browses BenQ's account on Plurk as a member of the community. To achieve the research objectives, the researcher conducted a case study and thoroughly analyzed the plurks and responses between the account host and its followers. Before conducting an analysis of information and opinion of BenQ on Plurk, the paper briefly introduces Plurk and describes several of its key functions. And the paper presents an overview of BenQ and the BenQ brand community on Plurk.

Plurk

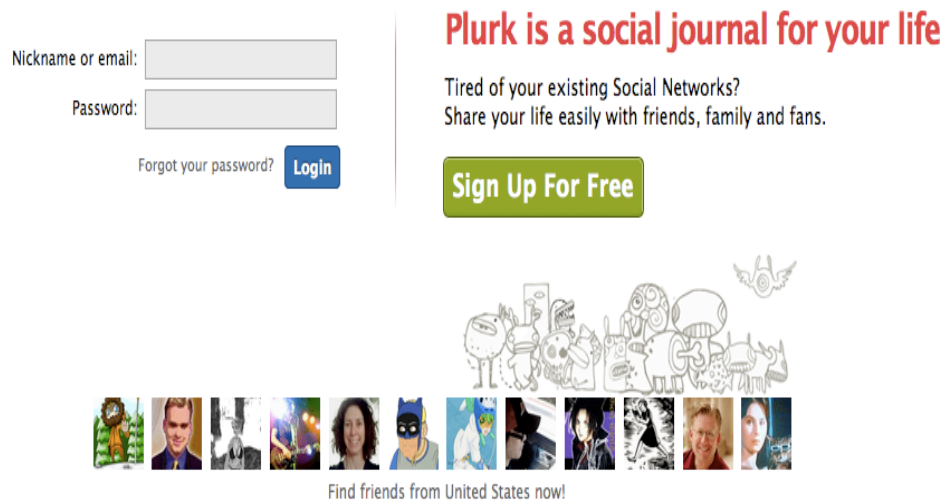


Figure 1. The Plurk sign-in page

Plurk was launched in May 2008. It combines the powers of sites such as Twitter, as well as chat rooms, instant messaging, and discussion forums. Its interface allows users to update “events” in their daily lives and keep up with those of others in a chronological order (Plurk). Plurks are messages shown on a user’s home page through a scrollable timeline (see Figure 2). Users can choose some preset “qualifiers” to plurk with, such as loves, likes, shares, gives, hates, wants, wishes, has, will, ask, was, feels, thinks, says, and is, as well as custom-made, freestyle qualifiers.

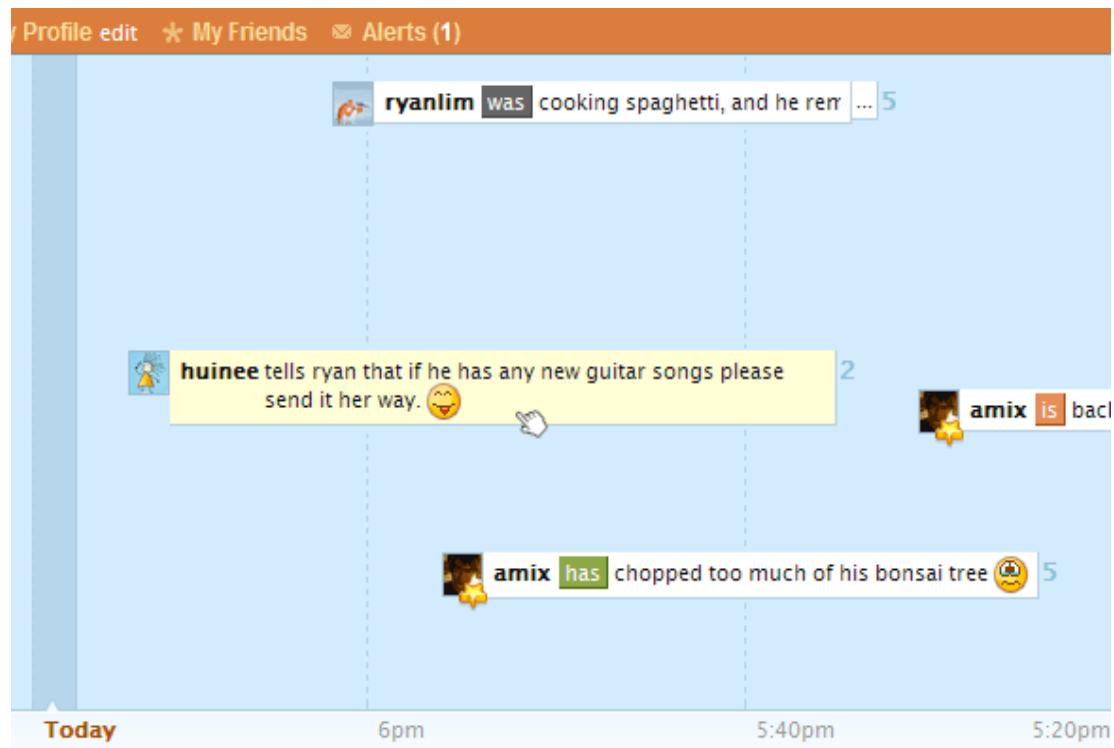


Figure 2. The plurks in a user's timeline

A single plurk is one message including the qualifier and the number of replies for the message. This allows a user to determine the significance of the message based on people who posted the message and whether the discussion thread is interesting or not. This way, the user can prioritize the unread messages and read a large number of messages that are deemed as important at the same time.

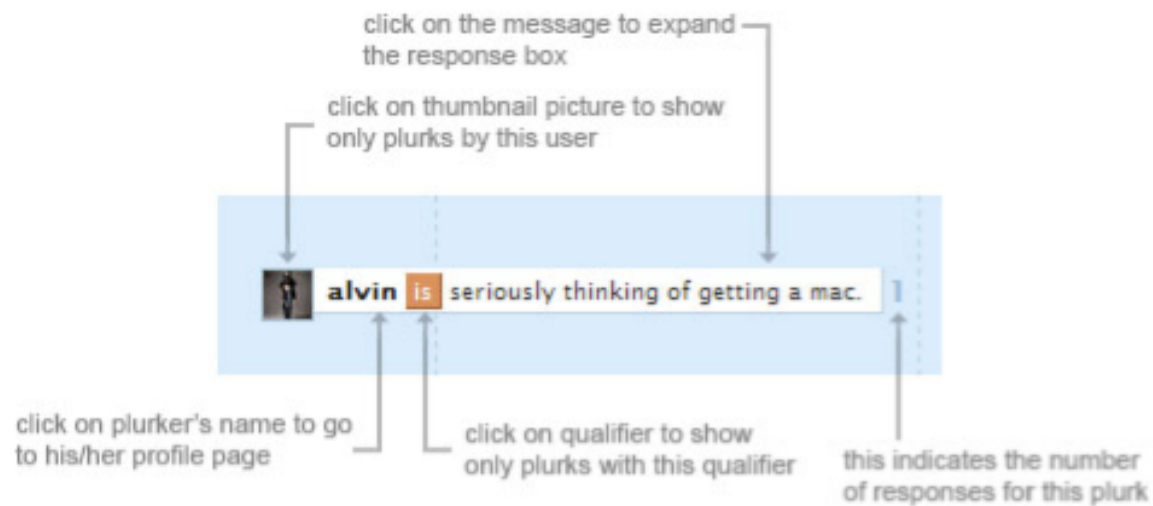


Figure 3. A one-line plurk showing who posted the plurk, the qualifier, the message snippet, and the number of responses

In addition to distinguishing important from unimportant messages, Plurk allows users to determine the levels of their “lifestreams” by using simple plurks or private plurks for friend or fans. Simple plurks can be shared with everyone, while private plurks are shared with a chosen group, which encourages people to segment their friend lists based on the types of relationship and level of intimacy. A friend can follow a user on his or her own plurk; at the same time, the user can follow the friend on the user’s own plurk. Fans can only follow a user on the user’s plurk on their own plurks.

Plurk has competitive advantages over other microblogging services. One additional benefit of the service is the ability to share pictures and videos directly from within the service. Plurk search is another useful feature that differentiates Plurk from

other microblogging services. Also, people can instantly search for other Plurk users or topics from the timeline.

Here, several important functions that are embedded in Plurk are described.

Karma value. Plurk guides people to reply to posts instead of abusively posting original plurks. In order to encourage people to adhere to this guideline, Plurk uses a karma system. Karma is generally perceived as the reward for one's righteous behavior. Hence, if a person's friend request is denied because of abused and/or spammed messages on Plurk, the person's karma value will drop as a penalty. Plurking every day and gaining fans are the best methods for raising karma value.

Profile review. Profile review indicates how many new plurkers, neither friends nor fans, have viewed the account. According to the design of Plurk, becoming a friend or a fan enables a user to follow new plurks on the user's own timeline. So the number of profile reviews indicates the number of strangers who have viewed the plurk before signing on as a friend or fan. In other words, the number of profile reviews is the number of unique visitors. The greater the number of profile reviews is, the greater the number of potential friends or fans is.

Plurks. The number of plurks is the total number of plurks a user has posted since the account was created. The frequency of plurking can be estimated by dividing the total number of plurks by the total number of days the account has been active. This number is important because it helps a person determine the degree of activity on the account.

Plurk responses. Plurk responses reflect how many times the account owner actively responded to other plurkers. Hence, the figure represents the level of interaction between the account owner and other plurkers.

Friends and fans. Relationships in Plurk contexts are very definitive. Friendship is a bilateral relationship. As such, a user can keep track of a friend's plurk on the user's own timeline and vice versa. However, the fan feature only allows a user to follow another's plurk on the user's own timeline.

Plurk search. Plurk search is a keyword search engine based on what Plurk users have posted in the past.

Plurk trend. Plurk trend displays the trend of keywords. When a user types in a keyword, Plurk trend will show the most popular related keywords that were discussed.

BenQ

Temporal (2006, p. 67) found the Taiwanese BenQ brand fascinating to study. In his book *Asia's Star Brands*, he described BenQ as an ambitious and talented youngster ready to wield its influence over the world. BenQ is a spin-off of Acer, but unlike the Acer brand, which focuses on IT products, BenQ aims at more entertainment-oriented consumer electronics. The spin-off signifies that different marketing strategies were being employed. According to K.Y. Lee, the chairman and chief executive of BenQ, branding is the only way to be influential in the global market. A brand is a bridge between a company and a consumer. The positive feelings people have toward the brand will ultimately translate to future purchase behavior. Thus, BenQ's marketing strategy has

been to attempt to build a strong and long-term relationship with end users and resellers. One of the competitive advantages that BenQ possesses is its focus on the consumer. BenQ intends to develop products that consumers really want instead of pushing products that already exist. For that reason, listening to consumers' feedback is particularly essential. Apart from traditional advertising, BenQ has been adventurous in trying new means of interacting with consumers, including sponsoring sporting events and BenQ JoyFamily Smart Manager, a software package designed to enhance the BenQ consumers' shopping experience. BenQ JoyFamily Smart Manager establishes a live connection between customer service and other 'JoyFamily' friends to enable customers to get answers to queries just when they want them. BenQ is also active on the Web and is eager to maintain long-term relationships with consumers by building an online community, as evidenced by its accounts on Plurk and Facebook. As such, BenQ appears to be a company actively participating in social media.

BenQ's "A Ji Shih"

In April 2009, BenQ opened a new account on Plurk. To build an online brand community on Plurk is part of BenQ's social networking strategy. According to Jerry Wang, vice president of the BenQ Corporation, a brand is liked because of its humanizing features. Hence, BenQ came up with A Ji Shih, the spokesman for BenQ on Plurk.

A Ji Shih is a personified lion. In Mandarin, the pronunciation of A Ji Shih is the same as that of the name of a famous chef in Taiwan. BenQ attempts to shape the lion as

a friendly figure by using the pun “A Ji Shih knows nothing about cooking but BenQ’s insider information.”



Figure 4. The profile of A Ji Shih on Plurk

Since A Ji Shih was launched in April 2009, the online personality has been very enthusiastic about plurking and responding simultaneously. It has posted 321 plurks and left 1,942 feedbacks on others' plurks. More than 1,500 users have begun following BenQ on Plurk. As of November 2009, A Ji Shih had 810 friends and 747 fans. The number of unique visitors to A Ji Shih's account has been estimated to be 9,349 (Plurk).

Ever since the account was activated, A Ji Shih has been a very vigorous plurker. Every day, A Ji Shih starts up a conversation. The topics range from chitchat to company announcements, and the content can take various forms. Most of the time, a plurk is a

one-line message, but other times, a plurk can be a link to a Web site, sometimes video-sharing websites. A Ji Shih is not only active in daily plurking but also in immediately responding to other Plurk users. The level of active interaction between A Ji Shih and followers is exemplified in the number of responses. A Ji Shih is so dynamic that it has reached “Plurk Nirvana” with a karma value over 80.

RESULTS

In order to explore the communication patterns between the company and potential users, the study categorized the conversations taking place on Plurk based on content. When analyzing the plurks on A Ji Shih's account, the researchers explored four types of topics: casual conversation, announcement, information provision, and survey. Based on the communication patterns between the company and other users on Plurk, the study revealed potential marketing techniques that companies can use when integrating microblogging into their marketing mix.

CASUAL CONVERSATION

Casual conversation messages are the ones that occur the most often. The share and say qualifiers are frequently used in this category, as are the is and ask qualifiers. When BenQ first opened the account, A Ji Shih often started conversations with chitchat. The topics covered traditional festivals, the weather, and office culture.

An aspect worth noticing is the several pieces of news about BenQ-sponsored events and celebrity spokespeople for BenQ under the guise of casual conversation. For example, A Ji Shih regularly shared and updated news about a BenQ-sponsored Taiwanese cyclist who plans to travel to seven countries by bike. A Ji Shih also shared some information about MayDay, a Taiwanese band that endorses BenQ products. Sometimes, A Ji Shih expressed his craze for MayDay, and other times, A Ji Shih shared first-hand information and pictures when MayDay was filming a commercial.

At first, the response rate for this type of interaction was rather low. Most of the time, it was essentially A Ji Shih's monologue. However, as A Ji Shih gained more and

more fans, the response rate grew higher and faster. Eventually, as soon as A Ji Shih started up a conversation, other followers participated in the conversation immediately.

ANNOUNCEMENT

New product announcements, details of events, and the outcomes of events fall into this category. The share and say qualifiers are frequently used here. As suggested in the profile, A Ji Shih serves as a great spokesperson for corporate information such as corporate social responsibility and product specification and promotion

A Ji Shih also shows how BenQ's social responsibility by providing first-hand information about how BenQ would do to help the disaster area when Taiwan was struck by Typhoon Morakot in August 2009.

Judging from the responses, people are eager to react to this type of plurk. It has the highest response rate of all the types. The discussion is particularly intense following a product announcement. Some people show their fondness through recommendations, while others withhold their agreement by pinpointing some weaknesses that need to be improved. Notwithstanding the fact that there is mixed feedback on the products, overall, the comments on the events and corporate image are positive.

INFORMATION PROVISION

Information provision is another type of topic. Under this classification, consumer electronics information that is closely related to consumers' everyday lives is provided. The information can be shared from insider information or through reports.

The sharing of industry information also elicits discussion. Groups of viewers who are tech savvy discussed the topic and provided insightful opinions.

SURVEY

A simple survey conducted on Plurk is the most efficient way to collect the wisdom of crowds. The survey is small in its scope, and its content ranges from consumer expectations to current marketing strategies, including product, pricing, and advertising content.

Examples are showed in Table 1.

Types of Topic	Qualifier	Examples
Casual conversation	share, say, is, ask	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A Ji Shih says, “Happy Dragon Boat Festival! Don’t eat too many Zongzis.” 2. A Ji Shih asks, “Is this a typical scenario in your office?” (picture shared) 3. A Ji Shih says, “Today, A Ji Shih would like to pray for Zheng-nan Qiu because of his ambitious deed.” 4. A Ji Shih says, “Do you like MayDay? They are holding a concert in September.” 5. A Ji Shih is “on the spot of where MayDay is shooting for advertising. One of the members just passed A Ji Shih by.
Announcement	share, say	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A Ji Shih shares, “BenQ U102 is available today.” 2. A Ji Shih loves, “BenQ mini projector JoyBee GP1 is in New York Times.” 3. A Ji Shih says, ‘BenQ Group takes initiatives in donating NT \$0.1 billion (3.1 million USD) for disaster area.’”
Information Provision	says, share	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A Ji Shih says, “There’s gossip that Microsoft will announce the plan for upgrading Windows 7 next Monday.” 2. A Ji Shih shares IThome Online (a Web site link), “Google confronts Microsoft by announcing Chrome OS plan.” 3. A Ji Shih shares, “Accommodated with Windows 7 starter, Netbooks are priced higher than Windows XP Home.” 4. A Ji Shih shares, “Ways to make your notebook durable.” 5. A Ji Shih shares IThome Online (a Web site link), “2009 is the worst time for PC industry.”
Survey	ask, share, wonder, say	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A Ji Shih shares (a picture), “Is BenQ U102 boring in appearance?” 2. A Ji Shih wonders (a picture), “Are you interested in buying a mini projector?” 3. A Ji Shih shares, “Some notebook brands partner with a telecommunication operator (Web site link). Do you have this kind of unfulfilled need?” 4. A Ji Shih says (YouTube link), “Did you see the commercial yesterday? How do you feel about it?”

Table 1. Types of topic and their examples on BenQ brand community

TECHNIQUES FOR MARKETING PURPOSES

By observing the dialogues that occur within the BenQ brand community, the study provides insights into potential benefits Plurk offers that are ready for marketers' use. The virtue of Plurk lies in its role in public relations, customer service, market research, and eWOM.

From a public relations perspective, the microblogging sphere enables corporations to create or improve on a positive corporate image by reaching the influencers and to have the opportunity to link to the network of people they follow. In this case, BenQ exhibits its concern for social responsibility in an informal way, just like daily conversation. For example, just after Typhoon Morakot struck southern Taiwan, BenQ told its followers that BenQ decided to donate a significant amount of money to help the disaster area. Judging from the discussion thread that followed, the action served to improve BenQ's corporate image. In addition, in BenQ's case, A Ji Shih skillfully and sporadically interjects information on events sponsored by BenQ in the conversation. This lessens the backlash against the abuse of microblogging as a public relations engine.

However, companies should be cautious when using microblogging as a public relations means. Traditionally, many corporate blogs or forums allows only one voice and

are rife with buttery language, which is surely a recipe for the failure of online brand communities.

As far as consumer service is concerned, Plurk addresses consumers' issues in a timely manner. As customers ask for specification or further clarification through messages posted on Plurk, the company replies to the discussion thread to solve the problems. Other companies can use this same approach on Plurk to solve customer problems. As previously discussed, Plurk search is a mini search engine. By using keywords, Plurk search shows a stream of plurks discussing what people are feeling, thinking, and speaking, both favorably and unfavorably, about the brand. As a result, Plurk search serves as an important means for exploring what has been disseminated on Plurk. In this way, the application lends a hand to companies in targeting unsatisfied consumers and responding to their problems quickly. For example, entering "hate BenQ" as keywords causes Plurk search to show a complaint from a consumer: "I hate BenQ customer service in Kmall. The service sucks." A Ji Shih replied under this plurk: "Thank you for letting us know. We will fix it." By reaching out to unsatisfied customers and addressing their complaints, companies are able to turn unsatisfied consumers into future loyal customers.

Additionally, marketers can make use of the collective wisdom that is revealed in the communications and conversations between consumers and companies. A great benefit for marketers that participate in Plurk is that many tech-savvy users and early adopters also participate. These professionals typically provide incisive ideas and feedback when they join in the conversation. Because participants perceive Plurk as a social venue, they do not consider the research that is conducted on their communications. As a result, they feel free to express themselves through their own language and reveal their true emotions. By monitoring the discussion threads, marketers can obtain useful consumer insights and apply them to future marketing strategies. In addition, by participating in the dialogue, marketers can also communicate their ideas with target consumers.

In the case of BenQ, A Ji Shih initiated a discussion thread about the perception of e-books, which are electronic files containing the text of books.

A Ji Shih: “According to the survey, one of the top 10 gifts that American youth want to receive is an e-book. What do you think?”

One user: “This sounds cool. But what really matters to me is more practical concerns, such as price, appearance, mobility, and function.”

Another user: “Price and content are pivotal factors.”

A Ji Shih: “We understand content matters. But we can’t deny that content is always the obtuse problem.”

The power of the wisdom of the crowd is fully exemplified in the microblogging arena. Without the presence of a coordinator, the direction of the topics is unrestricted. As a result, participants can exert their creativity and feel free to express their opinions in the microblog.

eWOM

Microblogging combines traits of traditional blogging, text messaging, RSS (commonly translated as “really simple syndication”), and social networking. It allows people to deliver images, videos, and other content online to their followers. As with RSS feeds, a microblog exists as a single information source. Böhringer (2009) categorized the linking properties of microblogging into four groups based on the different relationships: channel to channel, item to channel, channel to item, and item to item. The channel-to-channel relationship takes place between followers and people who are followed, while the item-to-channel relationship is one in which people can refer to another channel. The channel-to-item relationship is similar to Retweet in Twitter, which occurs when a user

finds a microblog interesting on another's channel and republishes it on his or her own channel. The item-to-item relationship is the basic reply. The rich linkages between followers and those who follow others facilitate the circulation of eWOM.

DISCUSSION

As microblogging is a pristine field that both marketers and academics are experimenting with to discover its potential, this study intends to provide some preliminary outcomes for the types of communication on microblogs, the techniques marketers can use, and some guidelines for marketers to follow in operating brand communities with microblogging. Traditionally, the success of online communities is evaluated based on the number of page views and size of membership. In these terms, A Ji Shih on Plurk is successful. Since BenQ opened its account on Plurk in April 2009, people have kept following the company. Of the 9,345 users who have visited A Ji Shih on Plurk, over 1,500 have become followers of BenQ and are now following A Ji Shih's plurks every day. The average number of responses to each plurk is 18. Based on the success of A Ji Shih on Plurk, the study intends to provide feasible suggestions for building an effective brand community on a microblog. As such, the success of A Ji Shih on Plurk can help in the identification of reasons such a community can work.

First, BenQ insists that its brand community is designed to serve the people in it. Oftentimes, people participate in brand communities for social links—they are hoping to build new relationships with others who have common interests. A Ji Shih provides the

latest consumer electronics product information and allows consumers to exchange opinions. For instance, BenQ forwarded a piece of news from ZDnet, saying, “Large price differentiation. 11.6 inch netbook will crowd out 12.1 inch notebook.” This bit of news elicited intense discussion. Some people questioned the effectiveness of the 11.6-inch notebook, and some said they think the size doesn’t matter but the weight does. Others prefer CULV (Consumer Ultra-Low Voltage) regardless of the size of the laptop.

In addition, frequent and persistent interaction with followers is a must for maintaining a brand community. In order to sustain followers, it is especially critical to invest time on Plurk. The host of BenQ posts regularly, engaging in the discussion and responding to what other people say. In A Ji Shih’s case, BenQ started up different topics with chitchat or information intended to stimulate interaction. In the middle of the discussion, BenQ exhibits great eagerness to listen to participants’ opinions and responds to their needs promptly. BenQ also shows that the company actively participates in fashionable venues like Facebook. For instance, in one plurk, A Ji Shih said, “A Ji Shih has a decent personality that prevents myself from stealing plants from other Happy Farms. But I can’t help but wondering...who steals my plants (angry image)?” As Happy

Farm is a popular source of entertainment among people in Taiwan, the plurk resonated with many followers.

To interact with A Ji Shih's followers, BenQ holds several online as well as offline activities. For example, on August 31, BenQ held a competition that encouraged users to brainstorm on the utilization of BenQ's new product, the mini projector. The winner will be awarded with MayDay concert tickets, a puppet of A Ji Shih, and a USB flash drive. As for offline activities, BenQ held a brandfest called "Plurker meeting" on September 25 in Taipei.

Finally, a carefully chosen spokesperson that can correctly deliver the brand's image and shorten the distance between consumers and company plays a pivotal role in branding on microblogs. In this case, the personified figure of A Ji Shih is a hit. Originally, A Ji Shih was portrayed as a figure that people could turn to whenever they had problems concerning consumer electronics and BenQ. Before the image of A Ji Shih was created, A Ji Shih's followers were mostly male. However, after the puppet of A Ji Shih was invented and showed up frequently, the number of female followers increased. Many females are fond of A Ji Shih's appearance. According to a Plurk search, people talk about A Ji Shih quite a bit. The character's popularity is so enormous that BenQ held

the first brandfest in northern Taiwan to share the origin of A Ji Shih and products designed by BenQ. After the brandfest, people talked about it on Plurk and shared their photos. As BenQ Vice President Wang said, “If consumers see an organic image and know that it stands for BenQ, the entire branding effort is successful.” The argument is self-explanatory in A Ji Shih’s case.

On the basis of A Ji Shih’s case, the future of microblogging is promising in relationship marketing. Microblogging enhances consumer brand relationship by facilitating constant communication between consumer and the company. In order for a company to perform brand management, it is important to know people’s opinions about its brands and products. In this case, Microblogging also serves as a great platform to explore consumer insights.

Apart from relationship management, the future of social media advertising lies in integrating ads into social experience. The advancement of Application Programming Interface (API) allows advertisers to weave advertising message into the very fabric of the platform in such a way that the ads actually enhance user experience. Minute maid, for example, has found a way to advertise on facebook (product placement on happy farm via developing applications) while adding value for their users (earn virtual currency as

they progress through a game by completing goals or challenges). The integration is seamless and there's no distraction.

The study has some limitations by nature; therefore, future studies are needed to corroborate the findings. As the study focuses on one company that sells consumer electronic products in this product category, the results might not be applicable to companies that deal with other products, product categories or industries. As a consequence, comparative analyses are needed to validate and expand the findings of this study. The time frame of the case is too short to examine the role of brand community on relationship marketing. As such, future longitudinal study should be employed for further clarification. Furthermore, previous literature has suggested that online brand communities will enhance brand equity, such as brand loyalty and brand retention. However, this case study primarily based on observational techniques is unable to deliver verification on this. Further development is needed to examine whether microblogging will influence brand equity to some extent. Finally, the study evaluates microblogging based on traditional measures of online communities. As the features of microblogging are different from those of traditional online brand communities, future researchers should develop an effective measure for microblogging and capture its full potential for

brand building purposes. Finally, this preliminary study focused on a successful case of microblogging and brand community in the social media environment in a single country, Taiwan. As the geographic boundaries no longer exist online, many of the insights may apply to other countries. Yet others argue that cultural, structural differences still exist in the online environment and thus a careful examination of the phenomenon across diverse countries will render a comprehensive understanding of the role of social media in marketing.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the researcher analyzed a Web-enhanced brand community in one form of emerging social media. Online social networks such as microblogs can serve as valuable community functions. They help people find rich solutions to ambiguous problems and create serendipitous connections to people and ideas. In addition, the light burden and multimedia feature of the microblog prepares corporations for marketing challenges.

By exploring every post on the chosen brand community, the study identified four types of topics. These conversation topics can function as the categories of different marketing manners. By regularly posting information that adds value for consumers, companies can establish their expertise and build brand awareness. Regarding public relations, companies can weave information about product features, corporate sponsorships, and social responsibility into the dialogue, which will gradually enhance the corporations' positive image. In the fast-changing marketing environment, the microblog bestows a great platform for marketers to communicate with consumers and collect timely consumer insight. Finally, companies benefit significantly from the rich

linkage characteristics of microblogging by expanding the reach of the service and spreading the word quickly.

Moreover, the BenQ character of A Ji Shih on Plurk provides a model that may be applicable to other industries. Adding value for consumers, persisting in engaging with them, and carefully selecting spokespeople are the recipe for success.

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VITA

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This report was typed by the author.

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